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ACTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING  
AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION

Statement for the Library of Congress hearing of National Film Preservation Board  
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The International Documentary Association is a not for profit membership organization with a stated mission to support and encourage the production, the exhibition and the appreciation of all forms of nonfiction film. Our members reside and work in the United States and in 23 other nations. They include individuals, as well as organizations and corporations, each concerned with a variety of nonfiction forms. The history of the documentary, along with its preservation and restoration, are central concerns of the IDA. For the past eight years, we have honored those who have made outstanding efforts in this area with a documentary Preservation and Scholarship Award, presented each year at our IDA Awards ceremony.

We at the IDA applaud the efforts of the Librarian of Congress and of the members of the National Film Preservation Board, for including documentary films in each of the four years' selection of the National Film Registry. The titles that have been chosen, Nanook of the North, Primary, The River, Street, Battle of San Pietro, High School, Harlan County USA, and Salesman represent some of the many social concerns and aesthetic forms that make up the highly diverse world of documentary. This recognition by the Library is significant, and much appreciated, by the documentary community.

There are, of course, many other nonfiction works which deserve to be considered in the selection process. The IDA's first suggestion is to urge the Librarian to look at the immense number of other qualified documentaries. Without diminishing the importance of the many fine fiction features that the Librarian has so far selected, we believe that the National Film Registry needs to broaden its understanding of America's cinematic treasures to more accurately reflect the importance of the documentary, and other forms that are not fiction features. Our second, very strong, suggestion is that the Librarian should consider potential board members who can adequately address questions specific to nonfiction forms. Although some of the

current Board do have expertise in the nonfiction area, the majority are clearly more linked to Hollywood feature fiction production.

The third recommendation from the IDA is to formally open the Registry to films of all lengths. A great many nonfiction films are not feature-length, and in fact the registry has already stretched its definition of feature by the titles it has thus far included. I do not feel the need to make a case here for the viability of the short film form. The importance of shorts is more than self-evident to anyone involved with documentary. (However the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has appointed a committee to study just this matter and I urge the Librarian to remain alert to the status of the short film within the Academy.) Documentaries in particular have often found their most perfect expression in the short form, but other types of short films are also worthy of inclusion.

The task of creating a National Film Registry is large and complex, and it is not easy to develop criteria or assemble a structure that allows meaningful evaluation. This is particularly true in the somewhat specialized field of nonfiction. I often use a model, which may be helpful in this case, of three discrete yet inter-related aspects of cinema to try to understand and evaluate a work. These are: the aesthetic, the economic and the scientific; or if you like, art, money, and technology. I believe that these aspects, when viewed as three points of an ever-shifting isosceles triangle, can provide a useful perspective from which to study individual films, a body of work, a genre, a national cinema, a trend, or almost any other film analysis problem, including the significance of nonfiction film to the National Film Registry.

Documentaries have been central to the development of cinema in each of these three areas.

Technologically, documentaries have always been a place where the demands of the subject have led to new hardware and new film making techniques. From the first

actualities of the Lumiere brothers, to cinema verite in the 1960s, to the bigscreen advances being made today in IMAX and OmniMax as well as the smallscreen advances of ultralight portable video, to the interactive education of the near future, scientific experimentation and the development of new equipment have often been instigated by those working in nonfiction.

These technological advances have, in turn, brought about changes in the aesthetics of film making that have been nothing short of revolutionary. Film style, form and artistry have all been greatly affected by documentary techniques. Cinema verite, for example, with its smaller, lightweight equipment; synchronous portable sound; and fast film stock, revolutionized not only the way the world looks at reality footage but also the way that fiction films are perceived. The manner in which people--nonactors and actors alike--are revealed by the camera, the way scenes are lit, the way that dialogue is recorded in thousands of fiction films owe much to verite style. Today, with a preponderance of media images drawing directly from verite, it is difficult to imagine how revolutionary such things as handheld cameras, overlapping dialogue, and natural lighting were in the first cinema verite documentaries.

Economically, nonfiction has been harder to pin down than the box office grosses of big feature films, but the numbers of people who have spent their careers working in nonfiction is tremendous. The sheer quantity of educational, industrial, informational, and just plain entertainment documentaries, produced each year far outweighs the numbers of fiction feature films made. It is true, the vast majority of these are not museum quality works, but the same can be said of most of the feature films made each year. Few people are making million dollar fortunes working on these many documentaries (although a few are), but I'm not sure that the size of a producer's profits are a valid measure of filmic merit. And there is an economic viability to the documentary world that drives its technological and aesthetic experiments. In the triangle analysis, neither artistic nor technological innovation

could take place without a financial impetus.

With an informed analysis of a broad base of films by a more diversified board, the National Film Registry can become an even more effective tool for creating public awareness and encouraging the preservation of our cinematic heritage. The work done by the Library of Congress thus far has been a good beginning to a large task. The International Documentary Association supports the efforts of the Library in this task, and we present our three suggestions with the hope that this dialogue with the Library will continue. We appreciate this opportunity to express our concerns, and we offer our services in advancing the goals of film preservation.